

Life's True Purpose

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[0 : 0 0] Okay friends, well let me encourage you to turn back to that book of Ecclesiastes. And if you need to use the contents page of your Bibles, then please do that. And just as we begin, let me read some words from Psalm 121.

Couple of verses, Psalm 121. I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where will my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

And this book of Ecclesiastes is helping us, and a lot of you mentioned that to me, not so many words last week. That it's helping us understand that in life, these big questions, these big things that happen in life, it's teaching us not to look to the world for our answers, and not to look inside for our answers.

But to look to the creator of the heavens and the earth, to look to God. And so this is what we're going to see in this passage this morning. We're going to be encouraged to lift our eyes to the creator of the ends of the earth.

So let me just do two things by way of introduction. That didn't work. Okay, one more.

[1 : 1 8] Here we go, first one to light the candle. It's a difficulty. Okay? And the second one is to ask you, if this is the answer, what is the question?

Okay? What's the answer? What's the question, rather? So this is the meaning of life. Okay?

If you're a bookworm, and you have read Douglas Adams' book, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, in this book there is a supercomputer that they ask questions to.

And they ask the computer this question, what is the meaning of life? And this is the answer after a very, very, very long time that the computer comes up with, number 42. So if you Google this, after Wikipedia telling you that it's a number that comes after 41, helpfully.

Okay? This is the answer that comes up in Google, 42. Now there are all sorts of theories. If you're into this book, and again, you'll find this on the internet. I had great fun this week searching.

[2 : 2 1] People have come up with all sorts of theories as to how Douglas Adams came up with this number, 42. Right? Was he on to something? Is he kind of a modern day prophet? Is he seeing something that we're not?

And recently Douglas Adams came out and he said, I've had great fun watching everybody kind of come up with their theories, but actually I just sat in my garden one day, looked out the window, and I came up with a random number. Okay?

Douglas Adams doesn't have a clue. And he's making a wee joke at it, actually. He doesn't understand what the meaning of life is. But let me ask you today, right? If you had to answer that question, what is the meaning of life?

Right? What would you say? Where's purpose to be found? In everything that we do. Under the sun. Remember, this is the key phrase of the book. What are we doing with our time? What's it all about?

Because we start understanding what our purpose is and start trying to grapple with what that means. We understand that this is the place where satisfaction is to be found in life. Where joy is to be found.

[3 : 17] What the Greeks called the telos, the purpose. This is where we'll find our satisfaction in life. And the amazing thing about this passage today, full of different ideas, different concepts, different places.

This passage today is going to tell us where to find it. So here is Solomon. Here he is. Look at the text. Verse 12. The king of Israel.

Here he is. The man who, verse 16, has great wisdom. And the man who, verse 10 of chapter 2, has kept his heart from no pleasure.

So this is what he's saying of himself. He's kept his heart from no pleasure. Now, let me just explain to you what that means. I was watching Match of the Day last night, half past ten. Just before Match of the Day came on, the person came on the BBC One saying, this is today's winning lottery numbers.

Right? Four, four, 25, 25, whatever it was. Okay? These are today's winning lottery numbers. And lo and behold, nobody got the winning lottery numbers. So it rolled over once again.

[4 : 22] Okay? So apparently it's 12.3 million, I think, off the top of my head, remembering it last night. 12.3 million is up for grabs. That's a lot of money. Let me ask you, what would you do with that kind of money? Do a lot of things.

12.3 million. This guy Solomon, he doesn't need to enter the lottery. Do you know why? Because he has absolutely everything that he could ever want in life.

He has absolutely everything. Money is no obstacle to him. Right? Imagine that. He's got contacts aplenty. He has people working for him.

He has people waiting on his every need. And he has all the power and all the influence to make sure that stuff happens. And the thing is, today, he is going to go with that stuff, what he's got.

He is going to go on the all-out pursuit to try and find satisfaction under the sun. This is him. If you remember last week, if you were here, if not, you can go back and listen to it online. Here he is trying to disprove the way he understands life in the first 11 verses of chapter 1.

[5 : 28] And he's trying to disprove his own theory. He's trying to find satisfaction under the sun. And maybe this is where this becomes a bit more real to us. Because aren't we tempted to think, as we live our lives in this world, that if we only had a little bit more stuff, or if we only had a little bit more luck with our job, or if we only were able to marry that person or have that family, take your pick from what it is.

We're tempted to think that if we had these things, then we'd be a little bit more happy and we'd find satisfaction in life. And the thing is, Solomon is telling us today, here's what he tried, and we'll find out they're very modern ideas that he tried, modern things.

Here is what I tried, and here is what I learnt. So come with me and let's do a whistle-stop tour of chapter 1, verse 12, to chapter 2, verse 11, right?

You can just scan your eyes over it. And Solomon's going to tell us very quickly what he tried in his pursuit of satisfaction. So this is a whistle-stop tour, so have the text in front of you, and we'll kind of go through it and see what he's tried.

Right, verse 13, here's our first pit stop. He's tried using his God-given wisdom. Now, if you know anything about Solomon, you know this is a guy who is blessed, God has richly blessed with wisdom.

[6 : 49] And he's taken this wisdom, and what he's decided is he is going to live a good life, which is a great thing. Verse 13, he knows that is a good thing. Living a good life, a moral life, as opposed to darkness and folly.

What he means when he says he tries to live life according to his wisdom is he's trying to understand life according to his knowledge. He's trying to understand life in his brain, and he comes to two conclusions, and he explains the two conclusions by talking about two riddles.

Verse 15, he says, What is crooked cannot be straight. So there's where his wisdom is taking him. Which is his admission that he looks out into a broken world.

This is his admission that he cannot fix it. Verse 18, The more he knows, the more he learns, the more it crushes him in the inside.

You say, what on earth is he on about? Well, let me just put it like this, okay? Remember my sister-in-law? She used to work for Sport Relief. Right? Love watching Sport Relief from the BBC when it comes on. But what happens? Sport Relief.

[7 : 59] There's humor, humor, humor, humor. Entertainment, entertainment, entertainment. Bang, there's a video. He's a project we're supporting. What's the temptation every time we see that video? It's to go, I'll click a few channels to channel for it, and I'll watch the Simpsons rerun.

Because I really, I can do without knowing about that. Because when I see it, I just feel helpless. And I think, why is this happening in the world? And actually, to be honest, if I just avoided it, then I could just kind of get on with my life.

And this is what he's talking about. It's why in one sense today, the happiest people in this building today are the little children as they run around. Right? They're just playing it.

I'm pointing over here because it's mainly my little two. They're playing in this corner, they're running around. They don't got care in the world. They don't got care in the world. They don't understand. They've not seen it. They don't know what's going on.

This is what he's talking about. Solomon's wisdom has led him to go on Google and Google thinking, I want to find the t-shirt that says, Ignorance is blessed. That's what I want for my life.

[9 : 00] I don't want to understand that. It's just getting me nowhere. He's saying that wisdom isn't the answer. And then if you look at chapter 2, he rhymes off the other places very quickly where he went looking for satisfaction.

He went looking for laughter. Did you see it mentioned that one? So Solomon tries to be the life and the soul of the party. He tries to fill the palace with the finest comedians around.

I mean, he is hosting live at the Apollo, at his palace every night, hoping that they can kind of laugh the way out of the despair of the world. Trying to cover up the pains and the questions.

He's the kind of guy that's going around the dinner table on his phone, YouTube, looking at dogs chasing your tails and thinking, isn't that so funny? He's trying to escape it with laughter. And laughter doesn't work.

Verse 3, he tries wine. He tries to cheer his body with wine. Which I don't think is Solomon's admission there that he's getting drunk all the time.

[9 : 58] That's not his... I don't think that's what he's saying. What he's telling us is that he became a wine connoisseur. Right? Loved a lovely bottle of Merlot, bottle of red, the most expensive one around.

Right? He's got the app. He's into the smell test. He even knows what that means. He's the kind of guy, when he went to a restaurant, you imagine this, he looks at the menu and he thinks, I'll have the most expensive one on that menu.

And I'll have four of them, please. He's looking for his answer by looking at wine. Wine doesn't cut it. Verse 4, he tries great works.

You see him? He's just running around from thing to thing. He's set about great building projects. He's building houses. Do you see what he's saying? He's building vineyards. This is presumably where his wine is coming from.

He's building gardens. He's building pools. He's trying to live the life of luxury with his many slaves, which is just employees, I think, people working for him. He's got possessions.

[11:00] He's got more than anyone else who's ever lived possessions. He's got silver and gold. Right? Every night he's there doing snow angels in his money. He's got tons of it. He's got singers.

So as well as live at the Apollo in his house, he's hosting last night at the proms. He's got the finest musicians to come and to play their music. And then he tries concubines. He tries lots and lots of sex with lots and lots of different women.

And if you know anything about Solomon, the way that he's portrayed in the Bible, is someone who got it tragically, tragically wrong in terms of his obedience to the Lord, particularly when it came to his love of women.

And so Solomon's on the wild goose chase trying to chase all of this, trying to find satisfaction in his life. And he comes to two conclusions. And the first one might shock you a little bit. Maybe it won't.

I don't know. Here's the first thing he says. It's all the things he tried. Right? What does he say? Verse 10, it was pleasurable. Things he tried, if you think about it, friends, they are good things from God.

[12:11] Think about it. C.S. Lewis used to call these things joy pointers. Things that weren't ends in themselves. They were pointing beyond themselves to the God who created all things and who is the God of all joy.

Just think about a few of these things. I mean, how good is it to share a meal and to laugh with friends? It's a wonderful thing. Alex and I have got friends that we, we've got two friends and we call them the radiators.

Because we spend time with them. We spend time in their presence and we have a laugh with them. We enjoy their company. And do you know what? It is a tonic for the soul. Laughter is a great thing.

It's a wonderful thing. Some of you will love music. I mean, how good is good music? Some of you will love rock music.

Some of you will love classical music. I know some of you tell me about your love for classical music. You say, Handel's Messiah and you go and you hear it played in somewhere like the Usher Hall or the Albert Hall.

[13:13] These wonderful designs of architecture that people would come up with and you think, wow, isn't this incredible? The intuition, the creative flair that God has given mankind that we can design this stuff.

And friends, I think that is why there was such an outpouring of emotion, wasn't there, when we saw Notre Dame go up in flames. Just an outpouring of emotion, just that wonderful building. We want to keep it.

It's why I'd imagine there was an outpouring of money at the same time to try and restore it. And God's good gift of sex. Remember, we thought about this last week, this book that God has given us, the Song of Songs, the Song of Solomon, where we see this man and this woman celebrating God's good design for sex within their marriage.

this wonderful gift that God has given us. All these things, good gifts from God. But what happens is that we take the good things and we make them God things.

We see them as ends in themselves and we think that these things alone will satisfy us. And we want the gifts, we don't want the giver. And that's where we make our greatest mistake.

[14 : 27] What is it that happens when we take these things and we use them for our own pleasure? You think about laughter, friends. Where is it that often we do all the time, I'm sure, people in our world do.

Where is it people get their laughs from? They get it from the expense of other people. Alcohol leading people into addiction and all sorts of social issues.

Music that identifies, objectifies women and sexual objects, money that's also often connected to the abuse of power. What is it? We take these good things.

Friends, we abuse them and use them for our own desires. If you look at the text again, here's the key phrase that Solomon is telling us what he did and how he used these things before. And it's that phrase for myself.

Got it there at the end of verse 4. Chapter 2. I planted vineyards for who, Solomon? I planted them for myself. Right, verse 5. I made myself gardens and parks.

[15 : 31] Verse 6. I made myself pools. Verse 8. I gathered for myself gold and silver. So what he's doing is he's using these things, looking, treating them as ends and looking for his satisfaction and purpose in life from these things.

He wants the gifts. He doesn't want the giver. And he tells us that it was pleasurable. But what he also tells us in verse 11, that as he contemplated all the energy that he expended in all of us, he concludes that it was vanity.

We thought about that word last week. It was meaningless. And this word that's probably best seen by the blowing out of a candle. Remember we saw this. What are you seeing?

The pleasure. It was there. But when I tried to grasp it, I couldn't get it. When I tried to catch it and put it in my pocket, I couldn't. When I tried to bottle it and live in the moment, it was here, there, and then it was gone.

Here's what he's concluding in his all-out search for satisfaction in life without God, that it was all vanity. It was like the smoke from a candle.

[16 : 40] And friends, the thing is that it's not just Solomon that's saying these things. Actually, you see this all the time. Let me just give you really quickly, because of time, two people who've said this recently.

Johnny Wilkinson. Okay? Now, I remember exactly where I was when he slotted this drop goal. Exactly where I was, right? Even as a Scot, I allowed myself a little smile.

I remember exactly where he was when he slotted this drop goal. He lived every boy's dream. Picked for his country, stand off, gets to the Rugby World Cup squad, gets to the Rugby World Cup final.

Last seconds of the game, he's presented with a chance to win the World Cup, the men's Rugby World Cup for his country. And he slots it. And the thing about him is that he said this in the final moments of that game, right?

He said, I sat in the changing room in Sydney after that epic battle until pretty much everyone had left. I didn't want to wave goodbye because I didn't want to let go of the moment and give in to its inevitable passing.

[17 : 49] I had already begun to feel the elation slipping away during the lap of honour around the field. Isn't that interesting? Couldn't grasp it, couldn't bottle it, couldn't take it, didn't want to lose it, but it went.

Right? Another guy, Jim Carrey, was one of my favourite actors growing up, said this, I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so that they can see that it's not the answer. Friends, both testimonies to the truth that is it not that what our world offers us is the good life.

Friends, it's at times shockingly shallow. And the challenge of this passage today is to allow God, our creator, to define for us and tell us what the good life is.

Solomon's saying, I get you Jim, I get you Johnny, I tried it too, I tried it too, I lived my dream, I did everything I ever wanted and it didn't last.

And here's, he's learned two facts from his pleasure search. Here's the first one, here's what he found. He thinks about the grave. After all of this he said, after he's tried it all he thinks about the grave and he says, verse 16 of chapter 2, how the wise dies like the fool.

[19 : 09] Right? He calls it, what does he call it? The same event happens to them both, the same fate. Friends, it doesn't matter whether the defining letters of your life are PhD or LSD.

Friends, at the end of the day we face the same event. Let me just tell you, we've moved house to Libertin and I'm reminded of this every single day. Opposite our house is our co-op funeral directors.

Right? Just up the road is Morton Hall Cemetery, crematorium rather, which means that our street is the street that hearses go up and down all the time. And right opposite our house again, just up from the co-op funeral directors is Libertin Cemetery.

And I take the girls, I walk them to nursery every morning and we walk through the cemetery and they have great fun just pointing at the gravestones and thinking about all the different things. Let me just tell you, there are two types of gravestones that you get in that cemetery and imagine you get them in every cemetery.

You get the ones full of marble, right centre piece, pride of place in the middle of the cemetery, full on marble, maybe a cross there as well. You've got angels kind of with their things pointing in.

[20 : 17] You've got lined candles. You've got flowers from the side. You've got people round it all the time coming to lay stuff again and again and again and you've got the person in the corner who's got a stone and on the stone is a scribbled name.

But friends, the same event happens to them both, happens to us all. That's what Solomon's concluded. Yes, it's great to live a wise life and to not live as a fool, but you know what, at the end of the day it's the same event.

And secondly, he thinks about his stuff, so he thinks about all this stuff that he's worked so hard to accumulate over the years, all the energy he's expended and he thinks to himself, I'm going to have to leave this and I'm going to have to leave it to somebody and I'm going to have to leave it to my son and who knows whether he's going to be a wise man or a fool.

Right? I mean, he might just take all my stuff that I've worked so hard for over the years and just go on the party of parties and just blow it all. And it must have been, all my toil, has that been worth it?

For instance, if you know your Bibles, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, boy was he a fool. Solomon says it, it's like the candle, it's all vanity.

[21 : 40] What was I doing? What is it all about? And it's almost as if this point in the story that Solomon comes to his senses.

And do you notice that the me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me language that dominates that first section, when we hit verse 24, and this is the key bit for us this morning, when we hit verse 24, it turns into God, God, God, God, God, God, God, God language.

Look at what he writes. He writes this, There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

This also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him, there's a key phrase, for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to the one who pleases God.

[22 : 50] Here is Solomon's conclusion after all is said and done. Friends, I looked out there for all my answers. I looked out there for satisfaction in life and do you know what? I did not find it. And he's encouraging us to lift our eyes and not to look for our answers and our meaning in life in this world or inside according to how we feel.

He's encouraging us to lift our eyes and look to the creator of the ends of the earth. The only place we're going to find satisfaction in this life and purpose, and by the way, that does not mean life is easy.

The only place we'll find it is by looking to Jesus. And Jesus tells a similar story, doesn't he? Not about a king who came to his senses, but about a son who came to his senses.

A son who wanted his father dead. A son who bought into the lie that the good life was to be found away from his father rather than with him. And so he says effectively, Dad, I want you dead.

Dad, I don't want you. Dad, I want your stuff. And the way the Greek is there, the father is literally said to have his insides ripped apart by his son's request. But he gives his son what he wants and the son lives the life of Riley.

[24 : 09] He goes girls, he goes parties, he goes clothes, he goes popularity. But the son's problem is that he believes the good life is to be found away from his father.

And where does his search for pleasure and joy take him? It takes him to the pigsty. Lower and lower and lower and lower he gets until he is there.

And there's that moment in the story where he comes to his senses. And he remembers his father. He remembers his dad. And he thinks, I need to get to my father.

So he starts making the journey back. And the thing that's amazing about this story is that a walking son is met by what? A running father. A father who runs, who embraces his son, who was lost, who is now found, who embraces the shame that his son deserved, who takes the shame on himself.

And says, son, I love you. Fattened calf, ring on your finger. Says, son, welcome home. Jesus tells that story for a number of different reasons.

[25 : 17] Let me just tell you one and it's to help us see, prodigal see, that true joy is to be found not away from the father but with the father. And Jesus goes to the cross, friends, so that I can know that passage in Luke 15 not as just a nice story.

But as a stunning reality that somebody like me could come to know God. So why is Jesus going to the cross? Why does he go there?

To propitiate, to take the wrath of God that I deserve for my sin against the holy God on himself. Why does he go there? Why does he choose the cross?

Why does he take the nails? Why does he spill his blood? Why does he suffer the most humiliating and horrific of deaths? answer, friends. If you think about what we read in John 15 earlier, you can check out in John 17 later.

He goes there for my joy. And for your joy. He goes there so that I would know the joy of sin's pardon.

[26 : 23] He goes there so that I would know the joy of coming into this joyous relationship that has existed for all eternity between God the Father and God the Son. welcomed as an adopted child of God, not because of who I am and not because I've got it sussed in life and I live a moral life.

No, he does it simply by his pure grace. And he says, welcome home, son. This is life. This is purpose. This is meaning. This is joy.

Friends, the gift of the gospel is not stuff. It is not an easy life as our world defines it. The gift of the gospel where true joy will be found is when life with the Father.

And see when you can compare that with what our world offers us. Friends, nothing compares. Well did C.S. Lewis say that we are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us.

We are like a child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because we cannot fathom what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

[27 : 43] Our problem is that we are well too easily pleased. And so the call of heaven this morning, friends, and it has been a heavy time being reminded of the world in which we live, is to lift our eyes to Christ and to know that this is not about us having all the answers in life and it is to know that this is not about the strength of our faith.

This is about the Christ that we cling to and his ability to hold us. And he loves us. And the urge of this passage is to run to him.

So we started by asking ourselves, if this is the answer, what is the question? Right? Well, let me just end by flipping it around and asking you if this is the question, what is the answer?

Okay? And the question is the one that we find in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. And a catechism really is a document that certain people in the church in the UK at a certain point in time got together and they thought let's solidify everything we believe about the Christian faith.

And he put it together in a question and answer format so that we could get it in our bloodstreams. And people in our world could question, answer, get it in our memories, get it in our bloodstreams.

[29 : 10] We could read it on our own. We could read it at work. We could read it at church. We could read it at Sunday school. We could read it at home with our families as a way of passing on what the faith is all about.

Question one asks, what is the chief end of man? Right, exactly the same question we've been thinking about today. What is it all about? Why are we here? Where is purpose to be found?

Where is joy to be found? Friends, the answer they came up with and it's gloriously true and it has encouraged the saints down the generations.

What is the chief end of man? man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Friends, where does our help come from? We lift our eyes, Psalm 121, and remember that our help comes from the Lord. It comes from the Lord who is the creator of the heavens and the earth.

[30 : 11] So friends, let me just, let's just have a time of, just for 30 seconds or so, just a time of silence. And let me just invite you to bring your own prayers to the Lord.

In light of everything that's gone on this morning, let's bring our own prayers to Him, knowing that this is the kind of God that He is. And so, Father, we would want to commit ourselves to your loving care today.

Lord, we realize that we are human beings who are so easily distracted and content with other stuff.

And Lord, I pray for each of us today that you would help every single one of us to find our identity in your Son, Jesus. And so, Father, we cling to His words today, thinking of those words that the disciples said in John's Gospel.

Where else will we go? For you have the words of eternal life. So, Lord, we pray, increase our faith. And in Jesus' name, we commit ourselves to you, Father.

[31 : 18] In Jesus' name. Amen.